



MODULE 3

Supporting Parenting Skills While Experiencing Mental Health Challenges

**best start
meilleur départ**

by/par health **nexus** santé

On Being a Parent with Depression

Maybe Tomorrow

Why do they look so sad?

Are they mad?

I do see you.

I wish I could be with you.

I will make it up to you.

I love you.

I will come out of this sorrow.

Maybe tomorrow.

Parents with Mental Health Challenges May:

- Struggle with daily functioning
- Constantly feel overwhelmed
- Experience feelings of guilt
- Tend to focus on their children's physical care
- Have little or no enjoyment when interacting with their baby/children
- Find it difficult to cope with their children's needs
- Have to rely on others (partner, family, friends) to help with parenting tasks

Service Provider Survey Themes

Service providers asked for tools that would increase their knowledge and assist them in using a strengths-based approach to support:

- Attachment
- Bonding
- Positive parenting skills

Module Goals

To provide education and practical strategies on how service providers can help parents who are experiencing mental health challenges:

- Foster engagement with their child(ren)
- Facilitate secure attachment
- Enhance resiliency to stress

Module Content

- Mitigating Parent Mental Health Challenges and Their Impact on Infants/Children
- Service Provider – Parent Interaction: Focus on Parent Strengths
- Promoting Stability in the Home Environment
- Aiding Parent - Child Engagement
- Key Messages to Parents and Service Providers

Case Example



Shari, her husband and their two children 2 years and 10 weeks live in a rural community. Shari, who has no past history of mental illness, was diagnosed with severe postpartum depression. She is being supported by the Healthy Babies Healthy Children program of her local public health unit. Shari is on medication and spends a good part of her day sleeping or resting. She has a few hours in the afternoon when she has a bit more energy and

gets up for a while. Her house was in disarray until her mother arrived. She has not cooked a meal for weeks. She has let the 2 year old watch TV and has not been outside alone or with the children. She worries about not feeling instant love for her newborn, but can't bring herself to spend time with the baby. When either of the children cry, she feels like running away. Usually, she lets her mother settle both the 2 year old and the newborn. Her mother has moved in for an indefinite period to help the family. Shari's husband has resumed work after a 4-week leave.

Mitigating Parents' Mental Health Challenges and Their Impact on Children

- With the support of caring adults, children can learn how to manage
 - “positive stress”
 - “tolerable stress”
- [Centre on the Developing Child]

Stress in Children

”Toxic stress”: results from intense, adverse experiences that may be sustained over a long period of time.

- It may be related to a parent’s mental illness that is not of brief, transient duration.
- It can be considered an “adverse childhood experience”.
- “The negative effects of toxic stress can be lessened with the support of caring adults.”

[Centre on the Developing Child]

Child Development

- A child's healthy brain is built through positive interactions with nurturing and responsive caregivers.
- These positive, nurturing and stimulating experiences help to establish the wiring of the connections within the child's brain.
- Consistently responding warmly and appropriately when an infant/child is in distress is a key factor in promoting the development of a secure attachment.

Mitigating Parent Mental Health Challenges and Their Impact on Infants/Children

- Parents are aware of the impact their parenting skills have on their children.
- Parents whose parenting capacities are challenged by mental illness are feeling guilty, ashamed and confused.

Mitigating Parent Mental Health Challenges and Their Impact on Infants/Children

- The whole family needs support and nurturing by consistent and responsive caregivers
 - This can include other parent, extended family, neighbours, friends and service providers
- Family members and care providers can ensure that older children in a family build relationships with other adults and children, e.g., through
 - Extended family
 - Respite care (e.g., therapeutic daycare)
 - Play groups (e.g., Ontario Early Years Centres)
 - Neighbouring families

Parents do, feel and think ...

A parent with mental health challenges may:

- Focus on negative feelings
- Feel detached
- Worry that they are causing irreparable harm to their child(ren)

Service Provider – Parent Interactions

Focus On Parent's Strength:

- How is the parent caring for the child?
- How is the parent responding to the child?
- Is the parent able to connect to the child?

Service Provider – Parent Interactions

- Parents have many strengths.
- It is positive for parents to hear about what they are doing well even if it may only be a few small things.
- A parent might perceive that she/he is not doing enough for an infant through usual childcare tasks, e.g., feeding, bathing or changing clothes. Parents may not be fully aware that even simple daily tasks promote bonding and nurturing.

Focus on Parent's Strengths

- Acknowledge a parent's strengths
 - *"I can see how much you love your child."*
- Point out the infant/child's responses to the parent. Parents are not always able to read these cues and even less when struggling with mental health challenges.
 - Look how she smiles at you. I think she says: *"I am happy to be with you"*.

Promoting Stability in the Home Environment

- Help the parent in establishing routines that will promote stability.

Promoting Stability in the Home Environment

- Do the children have a routine for eating, sleeping, and playing?
- Do the children have lots of physical activity each day?
 - This can be structured (e.g., swimming lesson) and unstructured (e.g., going for a walk, playing actively)
- Are there community programs for parent(s) that promote:
 - Education
 - Attachment
 - Coping skills?

Aiding Parents with Child Engagement

- Encourage parents to respond to infant sounds with warm, affectionate voice tones.
- Encourage touch, including skin-to-skin holding and feeding.
- Encourage parents to respond to the initiatives of their children (e.g. questions, being offered toys or books to engage parents in play or reading).
- Encourage parents to take care of their child(ren)'s physical needs (e.g., bathing, dressing, feeding).

Aiding Parent-Child Engagement

Examples?

Key Messages to Parents

- You are NOT a bad parent.
- You don't need to be a “perfect” parent. Your baby/child thinks you are a wonderful parent.
- As you feel better, you will be able to take on more of your parenting responsibilities.

Key Messages to Parents

- Bonding with a child is a process that occurs over time.
- Developing a secure attachment depends largely on how sensitively the primary caregiver responds to the child in times of distress.
- Child(ren) can form attachments to other key care givers in their lives.
- Feeling guilty is a natural reaction to experiencing mental health challenges.

Key Messages to Service Providers

Encourage the parent to:

- Seek treatment and support.
- Involve other family members and significant others to develop a nurturing, responsive relationship with the child.
- Use self-care strategies including time for herself to refresh her parenting energies.
- Use mood elevating activities such as infant massage or music when interacting with her child(ren).
- Attend programs or do activities at home that help with parent-child engagement.

Resources

- Early child development
- Attachment theory
- Positive parenting
- Strengths-based interactions

Best Start: Ontario's Maternal, Newborn and Early Child Development Resource Centre Health Nexus

www.beststart.org and www.healthnexus.ca

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